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White Supremacists and the White Urge to Call Them Terrorists

Jin Chang

Introduction

This “rant” aims to pull back one of the veils which has allowed President Biden to uphold the system of white supremacy by critically analyzing President Biden’s choice to call the white supremacist rioters “domestic terrorists” after the January 6th white supremacist rioters take-over of the United States Capitol building. I also call for academics and journalists to critically analyze how certain arguments against President Biden fundamentally miss the mark when it comes to challenging the white supremacist empire of America. In essence, I hope to demonstrate why Biden’s election is not a moment to say “now the real work begins” (Biden, 2021). Instead I argue Biden’s presidency does not fundamentally change the white supremacist nature of America and scholars and activists committed to ending white supremacy must seek out the white supremacist roots of President Biden’s actions.

On January 6th, a brigade of President Donald Trump supporters stormed the United States Capitol building to stop the counting of the Electoral College votes which would declare Joseph Biden the president of the United States. The majority white crowd scaled the building walls, broke down the windows and doors, and entered into the capitol building with relatively little police intervention (Fadel, 2021). In fact, live stream videos show police officers taking selfies with the rioters (Chavez, 2021). In contrast to this lack of police intervention, Black Lives Matter protesters in the summer of 2020 faced a much more aggressive and mil-

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itarized responses in the wake of the murder of George Floyd (Booker, 2021). As the events unfolded, news outlets and politicians struggled to find the right words to call this event.

While some politicians and reporters initially called the rioters protesters (Weber, 2021; Bobic, 2021), others, such as then President-Elect Joseph Biden, noted that they were not protestors. Instead, he said “They weren’t protesters. Don’t dare call them protesters. They were a riotous mob, insurrectionists, domestic terrorists” (Edelman, 2021, para. 3). Various journalists and academics then took to calling the white people that stormed the capitol building and Donald Trump “domestic terrorists” (Osterheldt, 2021, para. 1; “WCU Professor,” 2021, para. 2; Kornfield, 2021, para. 1). However, some progressive scholars and journalists noted that the usage of terrorists also had problematic connotations (Shamas & Ismail, 2021).

The most common problematic connotation recognized by these more progressive liberal scholars and journalists has been the presumption that the push to call white supremacists domestic terrorists would allow the federal government to expand the surveillance state (Savage, 2021). While the heightened vigilance by the federal government to crack down on terror would theoretically be to stop white terrorists, the term terrorist is a highly racialized term in America (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019). Because of the highly racialized nature of the word terrorist, it is difficult to imagine a world in which the increase in surveillance and policing does not inevitably harm racialized communities as it has done so in the past (Setty, 2020).

The White Scholar and Activist

While I believe white scholars and activists are right to criticize Biden’s choice of words here, I believe the fear of an expanding militarized state is not the primary reason white activists and scholars should avoid calling the white supremacist rioters “terrorists.” Regardless of what the rest of the world calls the white supremacist rioters, President Biden’s statement of domestic terrorism shows the United States government will continue to quash any threat to the American state. President Biden will continue to uphold America, an illegitimate state founded on genocide, racism, and colonialism (Wolfe, 2006). Interestingly, the police force not stopping the majority of the white supremacist rioters revealed that the systems of power did not believe these people endangered the state in a meaningful way. Put simply, white supremacy does not endanger America’s democracy as it is the fundamental building block of America’s construction.

This begins to point at the real reason why white scholars and activists should not call the white supremacist rioters “terrorists.” When they are called terrorists it positions these white supremacist rioters as a group outside the mainstream when in reality President Trum—a candidate known for explicit racism (Strunk et al.,

2021)—garnered over 70 million votes (Lindsay, 2020). Furthermore, this number does not include all those that supported President Biden during the election, a man who made numerous racial gaffes throughout the election (Klein & Parks, 2020), opposed racial integration (Purnell, 2014), has the blood of Black and other people of color on his hands from his crime bills (Ottenberg, 2020), has been an active voice in the “authorization of every major military intervention” from 1973 to 2009 (Herr, 2020, para. 6), and supported President Obama’s mass deportation of immigrants (Barrón-López & Thompson, 2020).

Put simply, President Biden has shown himself to also be deeply entrenched in the imperialist and racist state of America. He too is a white supremacist—just in sheep’s clothing when compared to President Trump. Every election in the history of America has been the American people choosing which white supremacist they wanted to lead them. In short, when white activists and scholars call the white supremacist rioters “terrorists,” they fail to recognize the whiteness that allowed these events to transpire, and this failure is indicative of the white supremacist foundation of America’s democracy. Put differently, it ignores the overarching history of America which has been one where white people regardless of their class standing or political affiliation have used terror, oppression, violence, and white supremacist ideologies to oppress the colonized proletariat—the racialized oppressed communities both domestically and abroad (Forsythe, 1976; Fanon, 2007).

Conclusion

The election and inauguration of President Biden should not be a moment of celebration for any scholar, activist, or individual committed to ending the white supremacist empire of America. After all, President Biden’s material interests as a mainstream politician in America directly positions him to benefit when he upholds a system of white supremacy. Thus, when critically analyzing President Biden’s action we must pinpoint how his actions uphold white supremacy if we wish to stop white supremacy from reproducing itself.

In a similar vein, white activists and scholars must reckon with the ways their own existence also upholds systems of white supremacy—especially in the case of calling the white supremacist rioters “terrorists.” After all, academia and activism are not ideologically neutral zones either (Pillay, 2020). The erasure of the whiteness and the “Americanness” of the riot mean any theoretical analysis of the riots will be insufficient. Furthermore, without the recognition of whiteness, any punitive actions taken against the white supremacist rioters will simply be what Paulo Freire called “false generosity” (Freire, 2018, p. 44). Put simply, the primary contradiction that allows white supremacy to reign over America—colonialism—will continue unchallenged.

For those white activist and scholars that wish to fight against white supremacy in any meaningful way, it will not be done within the beast of the belly in pol-

itics or traditional positions of power as politicians or university presidents. Their only choice is to go against their material interest inherent in white supremacy and colonialism, pinpoint how white supremacy manifests even in liberal leaders and spaces America, and follow the leadership of the colonized proletariat both domestically and abroad.

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